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ABSTRACT

Wilderness, as a state of mind, has persisted among men since the beginning of time. Written history has documented man's struggle with and against it. It has only been during the last century that man, in a societal context, has designated vast tracts of land as wilderness. The extent to which wilderness attributes are perceived and the meaning attached to them varies with the observer. Over the years, it has been regarded both as an enemy to be conquered in the name of civilization, Christianity, and progress, and as something of value to be cherished and preserved. Thus, the dichotomy emerges between wilderness as a physical entity and wilderness as perceived by an individual encountering a previously unencountered, operational environment for the first time. For many people, particularly those who are born and raised in an urban environment, the wilderness begins at the edge of the concrete. For others, it exists at the bounds of their limitations. Therefore, each individual perceives wilderness in the context of his history, maturation, and exposure to different types of operational environments. As exposure increases and the individual matures, so does his concept of what a wilderness might be. (Author/NQ)

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WILDERNESS: A WAY OF THINKING; A STATE OF MIND[1]

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of wilderness, not as a physical entity, but as a way of thinking or a state of mind. For many people, particularly those who are born and raised in an urban environment, the wilderness begins at the edge of the concrete. For others, it exists at the bounds of their limitations. Therefore, the main thesis of this paper is that each individual perceives wilderness in the context of their history, maturation, and exposure to different types of operational environments. As exposure increases and the individual matures, so does their concept of what a wilderness might be.

Several years ago, when I was working with children in outdoor education programs, an event occurred that captured my attention. The event was quite common in that I had seen it happen many times before. It set me to thinking about just how people perceive their surroundings, and gradually it led me to what I call my "edge of concrete theory."

The occasion in question occurred when I was working with a group of innercity children from Oakland, California, at what was called an "ecology camp." Several hundred children, ranging in age from 9 to 14 years, were bussed there from the city and assigned living groups, counselors, and instructors. During the three days these children spent at the camp, they participated in all the outdoor education programs one might associate with such an institution. And since it was an "ecology camp," each child participated in some kind of an "ecology" course.

During the camp, I had the occasion to take a group of kids out on a "nature" walk. Because water is such an attraction to kids, we followed a shallow creek up a narrow canyon. Our goal was to find out where it went. But soon all of the kids became involved in turning over stones, looking for insects, fish, frogs, worms, and different kinds of plant life. Later on we began mapping the stream's profile, and marking where some of the different objects had been found.

All went well until several of the children began to complain about being tired, others about being hungry. A fight broke out between two boys who had previously been working well together. Naturally, I turned the group around and started back to camp. Several minutes later, the group again reversed its behavior, settled down, and began looking for more aquatic life. Eventually we finished the project, but I was puzzled by what had happened.

Retracing the events in my mind, I realized that problems arose just after the group had lost sight of both the camp and the road that followed the creek up the canyon. As soon as the children had reestablished contact with the road, their behavior ameliorated, and they resumed their previous activities. Thus it appears that, for these children, the road was a symbol of security, a

symbol of reality--an indication that they were not too far away from camp, and that they were safe.

Watching children in other settings, I have found a similar behavior. Generally the pattern is quite consistent with children exposed to a new environment. First, the children are excited about exploring something different; but the excitement is characterized by roughhousing and messing around. As the group begins the walk, the kids are spread out and there is a good deal of exploring. As the group moves further away from their starting point, the children begin to draw closer together, become more noisy, and in general become less attentive to what the instructor has to say. There will be much hand-holding, crowding, and clustering as close to the group leader as possible. Once the group starts back or discovers that they have been traveling a circular path and are approaching the point of origin, they begin to spread out again, talk less, look more, and in general exhibit the behavior they did at the beginning of the trip. For these children, the wilderness begins at the edge of the parking lot. Venturing into the woods severs their ties with reality.

Historical Perspective

Wilderness, as a state of mind, has persisted among men since the beginning of time. Written history has documented man's struggle with and against it. It has only been during the last century that man, in a societal context, has designated vast tracts of land as wilderness.

One dictionary defines wilderness as "an extensive tract of land, which the activity of man has not modified." A more complete definition would include certain psychological dimensions of the concept of wilderness. Mystery, beauty, freedom, and solitude are a few. The extent to which such wilderness attributes are perceived and the meaning attached to them varies with the observer. Such variation hinders the formulation of a universally acceptable definition of wilderness other than those stated in the Wilderness Act (1964), and compounds the problem of measuring its value. (9:1)

For example, Bradford reported that in 1620, there was nothing to see in New England "but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men--and what multitudes of them there might be, they knew not." (2:1) In 1846, a New York businessman took an extensive canoe trip into the "wild and silent wilderness" of northern Minnesota and described his feeling toward it as "composed of delight and melancholy, of perfect confidence and tormenting fear." (9:6)

The existence of different kinds of wilderness adds to the problem of definition. Bare mountain peaks, desert, forest, prairie, ocean, and even outer space have been labeled "wilderness." For most people, however, an essential characteristic of a wilderness is a forest. (9:1)

The coming of the Romantic movement in the 18th century witnessed a change in aesthetics which conferred on wilderness a new esteem. Wild, natural objects, such as mountains and forests, ceased being regarded as horrible and were deemed worthy of awe and admiration. The new aesthetic value of the sublime, encompassing awe, terror, and exaltation, aptly described the experience of those who forged into the wilderness. (9:6)

Americans have found it difficult to be indifferent to a factor so basic in their collective experience as the wilderness. Over the years, it has been regarded both as an enemy to be conquered in the name of civilization, Christianity, and progress, and as something of value to be cherished and preserved. (9:1) Thus, the dichotomy emerges between wilderness as a physical entity, as stated in the Wilderness Act, and wilderness as perceived by an individual encountering a previously unencountered, operational environment for the first time.

Social Implications

Wilderness exists as a sociological rather than as an ecological phenomenon. It is what we, both individually and collectively, imagine it to be. (13:8) It has been pointed out that in temperate North America, virtually every tract of wilderness includes some plants, insects, fungi, and other biota whose migration from their point of origin to that tract has been influenced by human activity. Many of the forest and grassland areas of this region have

been burned at some time or other by fires set by primitive man, whether red or white. (14:2) What is wilderness for one society may well not be wilderness for another.

A wilderness is a product of management. The management problems that wilderness presents are severe today and are rapidly becoming more difficult. Use pressures on a shrinking resource base are increasing. The land's capacity to accommodate use is severely strained and management techniques are poorly developed. (7:2)

While ecological research is being conducted, there has been little work, other than Lucas' studies on the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, on people's attitudes toward what they believe to be wilderness. Information on the visitors and their behavior, knowledge, and attitudes is essential for planning efforts and policy making to help visitors achieve their objectives within the framework of law and agency policy. Disagreements among wilderness managers as to what visitors seek and how they might respond to management alternatives is just as common as for use estimates. (7:13) Moreover, it may be just as common among researchers.

Use of resources, other than those that are reflexive, are learned--as are the motives for wilderness use. Catton states that "the motivations for wilderness use are learned, not inborn, and there are reasons to expect that increasing proportions of the population will learn them, both from each other, from contact with wilderness environments, and from conservationist organizations and resource management agencies." (4:126)

Before wilderness use can be learned, other forms of learning must take place. As stated earlier, wilderness may not begin at the edge of the wilderness boundary, but at the edge of the concrete. For some people, anything beyond this point represents a hostile environment. To entice people beyond this boundary, either artificial or real, requires either a strong incentive or an authority substitute. Every person has his own concept of a wilderness, and that concept is important to him. (14:5) But again, this can be modified through exposure to different environments and by association with other individuals.

Burch and Wenger studied wilderness visitors and compared them to car campers. They found indications of a learning process whereby some children introduced to the outdoors through car camping with parents developed the interests and skills to "graduate" to the wilderness, suggesting that car camping may produce wilderness "fallout" later. (7:7) Car camping and particularly recreation vehicle camping may accelerate this trend. Recreation vehicles, because of their design and inherent structure, allow people to explore areas that, for them, were previously unattainable.

Think for a moment about the society in which we live. We eat, sleep, and are entertained in boxes. We travel between home and work in little glass and metal boxes. Most of us work in little boxes, and our cities, towns, and highways are geometrically designed. To break the pattern, to begin accepting stimuli that contradict the structure imposed on the individual, particularly if that structure has been imposed for any appreciable length of time, requires some kind of link with reality.

The recreation vehicle thus provides a vital tie with reality. The owner is able to select the one which for him is the most secure from others as well as what he or she might perceive as hostile environments. It can be furnished with objects that represent security, such as familiar clothing, cooking utensils, bedding, and entertainment equipment. People in recreation vehicles are able to move about the country in relative comfort. But more important, they are able to establish and maintain a secure territory once they have arrived at their destination. Where the tent and the sleeping bag in the past have sufficed to delineate boundaries, the recreation vehicle now serves that function.

As abstract as this may seem, it does not take long to recognize the syndrome among modern-day recreationists. Observations at recreation sites, particularly at high transient sites, indicate that few recreation vehicle users venture outside the confines of their vehicles once they have parked and taken care of essentials. Of course, this is a generalization of the total process of developing interactions between individuals and different sets of operational environments. Many people are able to adjust more readily to camping than others. But for those without prior exposure, recreation vehicle camping offers an easy adaptation to "wilderness" living.

Interactions

The recreation vehicle camper may become the tent camper, or the car camper, or the boat camper, and maybe the wilderness camper. Making that transition from one to another may depend in part on the individual's perception of wilderness and the implied threat of that wilderness to their well-being.

Catton has stated that "wilderness use results from positive attractions by the natural environment as well as from mere repulsion by urban environments. Campers seek opportunities for social contact with chosen companions but are also motivated by a quest for privacy which can be gained either from geographic remoteness in back country areas, or from adherence to a norm of noninvolvement in intensively used campgrounds." (4:121)

The same may be said of neophyte outdoor recreationists. Positive attractions, such as national parks, may draw them from the relative security of their everyday living environments. Privacy, too, may be achieved not through remoteness but through exclusiveness.

An environment is operationally significant to the individual organism and concerns specifics only when they become part of the environment to which behavior must adapt. Responses to familiar situations and regular events are acquired. This includes the learning of responses appropriate to other group members in organized societies. When individual members, situations, or events change, new responses are acquired and old ones may be lost or persist. This means of adapting to change is a continuous process in all higher animal societies. (6:27)

One important factor in motivational development is association with others. The basic values of an individual are generally those shared by the group or groups with which he or she associates. If the people one associates with are urbanists, utilizationists, and nondifferentiators, and have a preference for easy-access car camping in places with modern conveniences, one has an opportunity to develop the same constellation of motivational attitudes. If one goes around with preservationists and natural-environmental differentiators who have a zeal for backpacking to remote places, there is a good prospect of becoming that sort of person oneself. (4:125)

The process of becoming either car camper or wilderness backpacker is essentially the same. The individual must have or have had some form of authority figure to rely on during the adaptation process. If this authority figure is missing or has had only limited experience with different operational environments, the same limitations are imposed on the neophyte recreationist. Thus it is man "together" that produces an environment with the totality of its socioculture and psychological formations. Solitary human beings are beings on the animal level. (1) Few people operate in total anonymity. Thus when one examines the wilderness, one may define a wilderness in relation to an individual as that environment that surrounds a human being when that human being has been isolated from the sights, sounds, and smells of human activity, to which they have become accustomed.

Group Interactions

There is some knowledge of organism-environment relations, but knowledge of how social groups adapt to an environment is still speculative. (6:25) Probably, it will continue to be so for some time to come. There is information, however, on how groups interact in outdoor settings. Some of this work has focused on people using established or politically defined wilderness or back country areas. Little has been focused on the individual and/or social group in their relation to wilderness as defined in this paper.

One fundamental of sociology is that man is a social animal. A person hunts, produces, and trades with fellow human beings, and usually establishes a nuclear family with someone of the opposite sex and lives most of his or her life in a family. Human beings seem to require group life to survive at all, or at least to keep their social orientation, mental health, and feeling of life as worthwhile. (10:1) This is particularly important when analyzing people's behavior in outdoor settings. Referring back to the innercity children attending the ecology camp, one will remember that the need for group support was very strong.

In another situation, several fifth- and sixth-grade children were observed working in an outdoor setting for several weeks. Initially, they exhibited the same behaviors as the children at the ecology camp; loud talking, roughhousing, holding hands, and general nervousness. After repeated visits to the site, these actions changed to where each child felt comfortable in moving

about the setting and engaging in the education program offered for their enjoyment. A dramatic change occurred, however, when these children walked from the familiar educational setting to a new setting, to which they had had no prior exposure. While the second setting was just across the fence and easily visible from where they had been working, it did not have clearly defined boundaries and trails. The immediate reaction of the children in passing from the old area to the new area was to revert to their former nervous behavior. Reliance on social interaction, particularly with the adults, became paramount. Each child had to establish contact, preferably physical contact, with another person as Shew (13) so aptly observed as in war, disaster, or the death of a loved one.

Upon returning to the first education setting, their actions returned to what had been established during the preceding weeks. Not until they passed through the fence and had reestablished contact with clearly defined boundaries and paths did this occur. For those children then, the fence divided security from wilderness.

As Percy states, "It is the 'environment' to which the organism responds in a biologically adaptive fashion, and the mode of the response is the same whether the environment consists of other organisms or is inorganic in nature." (11:238)

Communication plays an integral part of adapting to a new environment. It has been assumed that human uses of space are regulated by a conversation of gestures: communication by signs.

In all social animals, the function of communication is to enable two or more individuals to coordinate their actions toward one another and toward environmental objects. (6:25) Moreover, it is used to direct people's actions or encourage their actions in some form or another. But more often than not, communications between individuals serve as social reinforcements to current actions. Examples could be drawn from everyday activities; however, an example using subjects participating in an outdoor education program shall be used.

Most people do not participate in nature hikes and self-educating "nature trail" adventures more often than once or twice each year. So it is interesting to

analyze people's behavior on such a hike as it relates to the theme of this paper. Personal observations by the author indicate that many people's behavior is fairly stable as they leave their motor vehicle in groups and proceed beyond the boundaries of the parking lot and begin their journey along a well-defined path that has been established as a loop trail. If the group is not too large, and there is no other group nearby, the individual members will tend to spread out, spend a lot of time looking at objects in the surrounding area, and read the displayed materials. As the group progresses, however, these actions change. Contact between individuals increases, verbal communications increase and at times become louder, less attention is paid to the surroundings and the posted educational information. But as the group progresses a little further and ascertains that they are returning to the parking lot, their actions approximate their earlier behavior. Reading of display material increases, individuals separate, talking decreases, and more time is spent looking at their surroundings.

For these people, the edge of the parking lot marks the edge of the wilderness. Their motor vehicle is a symbol of scurity; security which they had left for a brief exposure to a new experience, and security to which they returned.

Participation in outdoor recreation and outdoor education activities requires in many instances group participation--particularly if people in the group have not been exposed to that kind of environment before. McKinley has stated that "about one-half of all wilderness use is by small family groups, and much of the remainder is by small clusters of friends. The wilderness experience i typically sought in the company of a few intimates. A partial explanation for this phenomenon may be the benefits stemming from the simplified role playing, reduced status seeking, and interpersonal competition prevailing in such a group and the resulting feeling of solidarity among group members as they meet the challenges of distance, time, terrain, and weather." (8:38)

But Stankey, Lucas, and Lime wrote that "it is likely that much of the current pressure on wilderness stems from persons simply seeking the chance to hike or get away from the highly developed, civilized world for a short time." (15:13)

Hendee, Catton, Marlow, and Bockmann surmise that most wilderness use is by small family groups who are more likely to have children than the censused population. Nearly 70 percent of all visitors took their first wilderness trip before they were 15 years old. Increases in wilderness visitation will continue as the offspring of current wilderness users acquire a taste for primitive camping. (5:18) Moreover, 44 percent of the respondents in Hendee et al.'s survey also indicated that three or more of their five closest friends participated. This evidence suggests that wilderness values tend to be developed early in life and continue to be reinforced through social behavior later in life. (5:18) Nearly 25 percent of the respondents were single, 75.3 percent were married, and the remaining 1.9 were separated, widowed, or divorced. Of the married respondents, 15.2 percent had no children, 34.5 percent had one child, 41.0 percent had two or three, 7.7 percent had four or five, and 1.7 percent had six or more. (5:14) It appears, again, that recreation patterns of adults are clearly linked with childhood experiences.

But another factor must be considered as well--education. Existing data indicate that people who have had at least some college experience are far more likely to be wilderness users than are persons with a high school education or less. Persons with postgraduate educations are even more likely to visit wilderness areas. In fact, a composite review indicates that more than 60 percent of the respondents included in these wilderness user studies came from less than the top 10 percent of the U.S. population in terms of educational attainment. (5:12)

The more one is exposed to different operational environments, the easier it is to experience new environments for the first time. One can hypothesize that wilderness as a concept is a function of perception and exposure. As an individual is repeatedly exposed to new environments, the edge is pressed back.

Wilderness then, as thus submitted, is much more than a physical entity; it is a state of mind, a way of thinking. For many people, particularly those that do not venture into designated wilderness and back country areas, the wilderness begins at the edge of the concrete. For those with no exposure, the wilderness may begin at the edge of a neighboring field. For others less fortunate, the edge

may be at the end of the block where they live and work. Wilderness exists for each and every human being. Where the boundaries begin and end is up to the individual. What the individual perceives to be wilderness is a matter of historical perspective.

It can be a poetic and deep-felt concept, more sociological than ecological, in the minds of people. It can exist anywhere.

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